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Casualty Circular No. 5/2013

Suicide by 3rd Officer from a container vessel.

1. What happened?

On 25th January 2012 at 0805 hrs, a 3rd officer, 25 years of age, was reported missing from a Container vessel, when he failed to report for his bridge watch. Vessel was en route from Cape Town to Walvis Bay at the time of the incident.

2. How it happened?

2.1 On 24th January 2012 at 1254 hrs, the vessel had sailed from Cape Town and was bound for Walvis Bay, Namibia. The Master wrote down his night orders at 2230hrs and left the bridge. He spoke to the 3rd Officer on phone at 2230hrs regarding the ship's speed and ETA. The 3rd Officer's behavior was reported to be normal by all crew members on board who had interacted with him during the evening. On 25th January 2012 at 0015, the 3rd Officer handed over his watch and went down from the bridge.

2.2 Next day at 0805hrs, the Chief Officer telephoned to 3rd Officer's cabin as he had not reported for his bridge watch. There was no response. The Cadet was sent down to check the 3rd Officer's cabin but the 3rd Officer did not

respond to the knocking on his door. 3rd Officer's cabin was opened with the Master key but he was not inside his cabin. Enquiries with the Galley Steward revealed that the 3rd Officer had not taken his breakfast. It was assumed that the 3rd Officer had taken food, the previous night after the watch, since his plate was found in the galley sink.

2.3 A search was carried out on board till 0915 hrs after which, an urgency message was transmitted and the vessel was turned around for search overboard. Although the vessel was in contact with MRCC Cape Town, aerial assistance for search could not be provided as the vessel was out of helicopter range. Despite an extended search by the vessel at sea, the missing 3rd officer could not be found and the search was abandoned at 0950 hrs on 26th January 2012.

2.3 During the search of the cabin of the 3rd officer, his mobile phone was noted to be missing. During the P&I representative's visit and interviews with staff on board, nothing unusual was reported with regards to the behavior of the 3rd officer. While taking the inventory and packing the belongings of the 3rd officer, the Master noted, what appeared to be a suicide note on the 3rd Officer's laptop. Unfortunately the computer crashed while attempting to copy the note. The suicide note was recovered by taking the laptop to a local IT company in Walvis Bay. The note indicates that the 3rd officer was emotionally distressed and had planned his suicide. As per the computer file history, the suicide note was drafted at 02:26 pm on 24th January 2012, which was shortly after the ship had sailed from Cape Town. Since the 3rd officer kept his evening watch from 8-12, it is assumed that he planned ahead to ensure that the ship was well clear of possible rescue assistance from land based resources. The ship's telephone records indicated that several phone calls were made to the same telephone number.

3. Why it happened?

The suicide note appears to be addressed to his parents and his brother. As per the note, the 3rd Officer planned his suicide due to emotional stress of a personal relationship which was not acceptable or misunderstood by his family. The note and the phone calls to the same number indicate that he was emotionally distressed and mentally disturbed.

4. Lessons learnt.

4.1 Signs of emotional distress and mental disturbances, such as repeated phone calls by a crew member, should be discretely probed without infringing on a person's privacy.

4.2 It is important that senior officers on board the vessel are suitably trained to provide at least the 'first aid' counseling and the matter is duly reported to the DPA, in cases where more professional help is considered necessary.



Capt. Harish Khatri

Dy. Director General of Shipping [Tech]